

CHAPTER IV.

CHANGES IN THE CONSTITUTION AND LIFE OF THE
CHURCH.

I. *The Doctrine.*

IT will be remembered that the Constituting Assembly declared “that the Confession of Faith, the Longer and Shorter Catechisms, the Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory of Worship,” which together made up the constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, were “the constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.”

The church has continued well satisfied with her Confession of Faith. Such changes as have been made at all have touched only the accidents of the Creed. With the heart and soul of the Westminster Confession the church has been so well pleased that while other churches are trying to tear the very liver out of it, this church has been attempting to anchor herself more securely to it. According to the mother-church’s Adopting Act of 1788, the Form of Government and Discipline and the Confession of Faith as then ratified were to continue to be the constitution and the confession of faith and practice, unless two thirds of the Presbyteries under the care of the General Assembly should propose alterations or amendments, and such alterations should be agreed to and enacted by the General Assembly.¹

¹ Baird’s “Digest,” p. 36, § 16.

In the Assembly of 1861 an overture was presented proposing to make it much more difficult to change the constitution. It was referred to the Committee on Revision, and does not appear to have come before a subsequent Assembly. It was an exaggerated statement of the real position of the church. The part of the overture relating to the Confession the church was probably ready for in 1861, but it was not ready for that touching changes in the Form of Government. However, the church rested with the Adopting Act of 1788 until 1883, when the Assembly requested all the Presbyteries under its care to send up answers to the following questions to the next Assembly: "Shall Chapter VII. of the Form of Government be amended by adding a third section to read as follows: 'III. Amendments to the Confession of Faith and to the Catechism of this church may be made only upon the recommendation of one Assembly, the concurrence of at least three fourths of the Presbyteries, and the enactment of the same by a subsequent Assembly?'"¹ A large majority of the Presbyteries returned an affirmative answer, whereupon the Assembly of 1884 resolved "that this amendment be and is hereby enacted as paragraph 3, Chapter VII., Form of Government."²

During the years 1885-86 inclusive, the new paragraph was itself amended by adding to it the following words, viz.: "This paragraph shall be amended or altered only in the way in which itself provides for amendment of the Confession of Faith and the Catechism of the church." Thus had the old method of amending the Confession been superseded by a more tedious one. A similar but more moderate change had been meanwhile wrought in the method of amending the Form of Government.

While the formal development of the Creed has been

¹ "Minutes of 1883," p. 50.

² "Minutes of 1884," p. 248.

next to nothing, it is believed that in a thorough-going comprehension of the great truths of revelation embodied in the Confession, and in their elaboration and defense, the Southern Presbyterian Church has taken no mean part. To prove that such is the case it is only necessary to mention the works of such great masters in theology and kindred departments of study as those of Drs. J. H. Thornwell and R. L. Dabney. Dabney has irradiated with the torch of thinking genius almost every phase of theology, anthropology, and soteriology; and Thornwell, with a chaste splendor of diction, has illuminated by a marvelous insight many of the perplexing problems in theology and in anthropology. Besides, there are many stars whose shining had been counted brilliant but for these suns. In the department of exegetical theology Dr. W. W. Moore is justly held in high esteem by the church.

2. *The Polity.*

The church undertook to revise its Form of Government and Book of Discipline as early as 1861. The Constituting Assembly appointed a very able committee for the purpose, and instructed it to report to the next Assembly. The church's sense of the need of revising these parts of its Standards is well expressed in the first report which the committee was able to make as to its work. That report says:

The committee are deeply impressed with the desirableness of our possessing as a church a more scientific statement of the Scripture doctrine of church government than is found in our present form. The subject has been largely discussed and the doctrine much developed in various directions since our present form was adopted, and the book is no longer abreast of the advanced stage of the doctrine as it is actually held among us. For example: the book does not contain any statement of what are the radical principles of our system, except a very imperfect one, introduced in a mere footnote. Again, our doctrine of the courts receives no adequate presentation, nor is anything found in the book respecting the duties in full of the different office-bearers.

Again, the evangelist does not appear in any part of the book, except in a clause appended to the chapter on ordination, and in the general reference made to that most important office in the chapter on missions. Then, again, the method prescribed in the book for setting apart ruling elders and deacons without the imposition of hands is clearly unscriptural; and the remarkable omission cries aloud for the consideration of the church.¹

It was owing to the vicissitudes of war that this report was not made until 1864. Along with it was handed the draft of the revision so far as the committee had proceeded—the Rules of Parliamentary Order and Canons of Discipline. Two years later the committee's work on the Form of Government was completed. Their report was adopted and sent down to the Presbyteries. A very large majority of the Presbyteries informed the Assembly of 1867 of their appreciation of the labors of the Committee of Revision, asked to have the results of their labors saved, but emphatically declined to adopt the revision.

There was a great diversity of views with reference to the proposed changes. The committee was therefore discontinued.² The church, however, was not satisfied with the old Form of Government and Discipline. During the years 1869-73 another effort to secure a revision was made; but this effort, too, and for reasons which caused the previous failure, was destined to prove a miscarriage. The results, nevertheless, were again stored in the archives of the Assembly.³

Finally, between the years 1876-79 inclusive, the successful effort was made. A revision was accomplished which met, to a degree, the want of the church as indicated in the report of the committee in 1864. The revision is on the whole a very worthy work. Had the only result been the erasure of the unscripturally broad de-

¹ "Minutes of 1864," p. 24.

² "Minutes of 1867," pp. 149ff.

³ "Minutes of 1869," pp. 377ff., and p. 396; 1870, pp. 518ff.; 1873, p. 328.

markation between the minister and ruling elder which the old book made, it had been justified; but the new makes a fairly adequate statement of the ruling elder's rights and duties. It brings out with greatly increased clearness the deacon's duties and relations, and magnifies his office after a biblical fashion. It recognizes at least *quasi* deaconesses, which is a step in the right direction. If women had always been accorded the privilege of so serving the church, there might be less of obnoxious womanism among the churches to-day. It articulately asserts that the church is the "agency which Christ has ordained for the edification and government of his people, for the propagation of the faith, and the evangelization of the world." As this is the biblical and correct position, the church was doing much to become able to take subsequently the correct attitude toward the hosts of partial substitutes for the church which well-meaning but precipitate, rash, and irreverent men have proposed.

Some amendments to the paragraph on the evangelist might well be made, however. The church is somewhat hampered by the limited powers accorded this officer in the foreign field.

The revised book is more distinctly Presbyterian, and, issued from a more solid conviction of *jure divino* Presbyterianism, than the old book. Occasional but not substantive amendments to the revised book have been made from time to time since its adoption.

Of the men who have watched and directed the development of church polity, special mention must be made of the names of Drs. J. H. Thornwell, B. M. Palmer, and T. E. Peck. To Thornwell is due credit for the full recognition of the rights of the ruling elder. Palmer has kept before the church the truth that the tenet of the headship of Christ involves the doctrine of the sufficiency of the ordained church and the impiety of any substitution therefor.

Dr. Peck and Dr. Vaughan have done special service in bringing to light the functions of the diaconate.

3. *The Worship.*

The external worship of the church has changed but little. Here and there in the church there is an observable tendency toward a less simple worship; and responsive readings and prayers in which the congregations take oral part, elaborate and unworshipful music, etc., come into vogue. This is very rare.

In 1864-65 Colonel J. T. L. Preston, of Lexington, Va., and others endeavored to have introduced into the Directory of Worship "a few Scriptural and well-considered forms of prayer, requiring responses on the part of the congregation, the use of such forms to be optional on the part of the pastors." The attempt met with overwhelming defeat; and though repeated in 1872, it found its Waterloo in the same year. This has been the most prominent effort looking toward a liturgy. Mention may, however, be made of the effort to have "a directory of the oblations" prepared, in 1868, and of that to have a burial service prepared, in 1880. But the tendency toward forms of worship has been very small, unless you see in the desire to revise the old Directory unrest with its simplicity, which is not very probably true.

As early as 1864 inquiry was made as to whether it was then expedient to revise the Directory of Worship. The work was never undertaken, however, in earnest till 1879, at which time the revision of the Form of Government and the Book of Discipline had been completed. The Assembly of 1879 appointed an able committee, which was once reconstituted, was succeeded by an equally able committee, which in its turn was reconstituted. This

committee gave place in 1892 to a new committee, the work of which, as modified by the last Assembly's criticism, is now in the hands of the Presbyteries, for their reception or rejection, and will probably be adopted.

The revised Directory remains entirely a directory. It is not more a book of prescribed forms than before. Its superiority over the old is in its more copious suggestions, especially about the public profession of religion by new converts and about administering baptism.

The church has shown a praiseworthy zeal in improving its selections of hymns and Psalms.¹

It is believed that the spirit of worship has not declined during the church's independent history. There seems, on the contrary, evidence to prove that it has deepened, that worship is viewed more as something which is expressed by the output of the life. To illustrate: Giving as an act of worship is kept in the forefront of the church to-day. Dr. T. E. Peck had this burden, also, of the Lord for his people and students. This instance is typical. Worship is regarded generally as intended service.

The meaning and nature of the sacraments have been kept in tolerable clearness before the people.² The propriety of special prayer and fasting on occasion has continued to be the common belief.³ But it must be said that the church's attitude toward the Sabbath is not worthy. Her great teachers and her courts have uttered no uncertain sound. Few churches have had such stanch

¹ It revised its "Hymn-Book" between 1861 and 1866; revised and published its "Hymn and Tune Book" by 1873. In 1882, as many of the congregations had begun to use the "Hymns and Tunes" of Dr. C. S. Robinson, the Assembly placed its imprimatur on that book. (Alexander's "Digest," pp. 357-360.) The Assembly of 1893 gave a similar indorsement and approval to Dr. R. P. Kerr's "The Hymns of the Ages." ("Minutes of 1893," p. 15.)

² Alexander's "Digest," pp. 345-354.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 355, 356.

defenders of the Sabbath.¹ But the Sunday newspapers, Sunday mails, and Sunday railroad trains, etc., have had an influence as potent as pernicious; and the protests which the church courts and preachers have made against Sabbath desecration are monuments of very considerable dereliction in respect to Sabbath observances on the part of the church-members.² Nor can a church long maintain its worshipfulness after losing its reverence for the day especially set apart of God for the purpose of his worship.

Family worship has not made considerable advancement, but the church diligently inculcates the duty, and some progress is observable.

4. The Social and Moral Life of the Church.

It is the common observation that war and pestilence are followed by general ungodliness. *A priori* it would be expected that man would be sobered by the destruction of his fellows, and led to set his affections on God by the evident instability and insufficiency of all creature existence; that he would flee from the carnage and chaos around him and make for the source of all beauty and order. But it is not so. The harrowed inhabitants of the land cut up and devastated by war are apt to betray a fondness for trifling and belittling amusements, and a slavish grasping for the meanest muniments of temporal good.

If we do not find a strong tendency to worldly amusements and to dishonest business methods in the South during and after the Civil War, and during the horrible period of reconstruction, we shall therein remark a nota-

¹ "Minutes of 1863," pp. 16, 164; 1878, pp. 628, 641 ff.

² "Minutes of 1890," p. 91; 1893, P 73 *etpassim*.

ble strength of character, a wonderful work of God's grace in the hearts of his people.

Were we disposed to reconstruct history, as many writers seem inclined, from a literal acceptance of the protests which the church has from time to time made against these forms of sin, it would be easy to set forth a very gloomy view of the social and moral condition of the Southern Presbyterians during the decade 1860-70. But the principle which forbids our seeing, through the protests against concubinage on the part of the priesthood of the church from 400 to 1200, anything but universal uncleanness; permits us to see much of the highest Christian virtue in the life of the Southern Church during the decade named.

The Assembly of 1865 felt called upon to speak concerning the prevalence of fashionable amusements and social recreations in the following strain:

The Assembly expresses itself with more earnestness on this whole subject because of the disposition which is observed in all parts of our borders to run into the inordinate indulgence of worldliness, at this time, in forgetfulness of the mighty chastenings of God which are even yet upon us, and because we see members of our churches and our beloved baptized youth, in forgetfulness of the covenant of God which is upon them, carried away with the world's delusions, to the subversion of the divine influence of the sanctuary, and to the neglect of the interests of their souls.¹

Again, in 1869, in response to an overture from the Rev. Dr. R. L. Dabney, the Assembly "earnestly and solemnly enjoined" upon all the sessions and Presbyteries under its care the absolute necessity of enforcing the discipline provided in our constitution against offenses—under the word offenses including the attendance by our members upon theatrical exhibitions and performances, and promiscuous dancings, against intemperance, and availing themselves of the expedients for evading pecu-

¹ "Minutes of 1865," p. 362.

niary obligations now permitted by the legislation of the country in such a manner as cannot be justified by a conscience enlightened by the Spirit and the Word of God, and must dishonor the cause of Jesus Christ.¹

These vigorous representations and protests against the evils specified are proofs indeed of their mournful prevalence, but are proofs as well of the fact that there was a large and influential element in the church most watchful against them. It is a marvel that the people of the church kept from frivolity and corruptness as they did. Few conquered people have experienced such a complete overturning of social conditions. A people of as great comfort and frugal plenty as any people on the globe enjoyed, perhaps, were thrown into the hardest conditions, and had a long, difficult struggle for existence. That they did not grow reckless and fall into bestial misanthropy and misotheism is the highest proof at once of their own virtue and God's goodness to them. Southern Presbyterians of to-day and the future may take a just delight in the heroically Christian character of the living in those early years of the church.

But not even with changed conditions and a country again prosperous has the church been free from a struggle on these subjects of dancing, card-playing, and dancing-schools. The church in Atlanta, Ga., was greatly racked in the effort to discipline such offenses in 1877-80. And throughout the church till to-day sessions and pastors have had to fight. Money-grabbing, gambling in stocks, futures, etc., have come to be fearful and prevalent evils among worldlings, and even among professing Christians throughout the nation. The territory of the Southern Presbyterian Church is not exempt. The church even has a share of those who worship mammon. And, furthermore, these evils have brought other evils in their train—

¹ "Minutes of 1869," P 390.

restlessness, thirst for exciting amusements, morally unhealthy living. These evils are naturally more widespread than the first class. Especially is this true in the larger cities. Nor have the church rulers in all cases fought well. Discipline is hard to administer—as hard to give as to receive. The church authorities have in many cases shirked.

Other social and moral evils which the church has had to battle with—to a limited extent among her communicants, to a greater extent among her baptized non-communicants, and especially among the worldlings about her—are intemperance and liquor-selling, ordinary gambling, and profanity. The church has bewailed and protested against profanity as a national sin of huge dimensions, has fought it in the pulpit, and has to a considerable degree lived out her horror of this sin.¹ She has fought gambling manfully, rating it as essentially robbery and leading generally to temporal ruin.² As an instance of the stand made by the church, reference may be made to the heroic, drastic, and effective measures against the New Orleans lottery by Dr. B. M. Palmer, culminating with the retirement of the company with the end of the year 1893 from the United States.

The church has been strong in its support of temperance, though consistently with its Standards it has refused to espouse a political party as an advance movement in its onslaught on intemperance. Its genuine attitude toward the question is brought out in a paper adopted by the Assembly of 1892, which is as follows:

WHEREAS, we recognize the liquor traffic as an aggressive enemy to the home, the church, and the state, an alarming menace to the Christian Sabbath, and a powerful obstacle to the work of establishing Christ's kingdom in foreign lands; and

WHEREAS, "Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the

¹ "Minutes of 1862," p. 36.

² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

law of God,” and a failure to manifest disapproval of, or opposition to, a prevailing evil is a sin of omission ; therefore,

Resolved. That we reaffirm the deliverances and testimony of our church, made in 1891, on the subject of temperance, the liquor traffic, and abstinence from intoxicants as a beverage, and we bear our testimony against the establishing and promoting the traffic in intoxicant liquors as the fruitful source of sin, crime, and misery.¹

This stand was taken against “the liquor traffic” as it is, of course, and is approvable.

The attitude of the church toward lynching and other forms of mob law is one of steady opposition. Her people recognize the extreme provocation which has occasioned so much mob violence in the Southern States—the insufficient penalties affixed by our statutes to such crimes as rape and arson, and the tardy execution of such law as we have, or their damnable evasions. Southern Presbyterians recognize the great provocations; nevertheless, they theoretically and in general practice deprecate at once the provocatives and the outbursts of mob violence. They preach and live commonly against it.

Brighter illustrations of Christian living than are found in Southern Presbyterian homes exist nowhere.

¹ “Minutes of 1892,” p. 462.